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Trace

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TRACE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Naomi Katy Louise Clement
B.F.A., Nova Scotia College of Art & Design University, 2003
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF IMAGES.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
MEMORY. FAMILY.....	2
CONNECTION. BELONGING.....	4
MOTIVATION.....	5
LAYERS.	9
MAKING.	12
NOTICING.	14
RELATIONSHIPS. EDGES.	15
CONCLUSION.	18
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	19
VITA.	20

List of Images

Image 1.	Scan of oatmeal cookie recipe card, written by my maternal grandmother, Alicea Robinson.	3
Image 2.	<i>Serving Platter</i> . Photo by Kevin Duffy.	6
Image 3.	Leather-hard bowls, waiting to be decorated. Photo by Naomi Clement.	7
Image 4.	Scan of postcard written by Justice, submitted as part of <i>Stories I Tell</i> Cup Project.	8
Image 5.	Glaze and texture detail. Photo by Kevin Duffy.	
Image 6.	In-process detail of newspaper resist being peeled away, and the final composition being revealed. Photo by Naomi Clement.	10
Image 7.	Decoration detail at leather-hard stage. Photo by Naomi Clement.	11
Image 8.	<i>Pillow Platter</i> . Photo by Kevin Duffy.	13
Image 9.	Detail of edges on stack of bowls. Photo by Naomi Clement.	15
Image 10.	Table top detail. Photo by Naomi Clement.	16
Image 11.	Installation view of <i>Dinner</i> . Photo by Kevin Duffy.	17
Image 12.	Image 10. Detail of table with lone place setting. Photo by Kevin Duffy.	17

Abstract

The pots in the exhibition *Trace* speak both to my desire to belong, to connect to my beginnings, and yet to still trace my own path forward; they are about making connections and missing connections. Through these pots I ask questions of myself and the world around me in an attempt to negotiate the edges of my life. How do I feel connected and present in my own life and relationships? How do I feel connected to my family and my roots, while still finding my own path? What does it mean to belong in a family that is divided by great physical distance? What is the cure for loneliness? My work is intended to convey a sense of life lived, and life still to be lived. Each pot is a snapshot of the journey, a tether that connects me to me, and me to you—a memory frozen in mud-made-stone for years to come.

Introduction

The exhibition *Trace* is a collection of ceramic work that investigates what it means to connect via the lens of functional objects. It poses and attempts to answer the following questions: how do I feel connected in my own life and relationships? How do I feel connected to my family and my roots, while still tracing my own path forward? What does it mean to belong in a family that is divided by great physical distance? What is the cure for loneliness?

All of the works in this exhibition exist either for the table, or can trace their roots to the table, which has always been central to my idea of home. As someone who grew up eating dinner as a family every night of the year, the dinner table for me is a place where one can both assert and understand identity. Gathering space, battleground, pulpit, and stage, it serves as a threshold for the happenings of life.

As a maker of functional objects, my goal is to make pots that are at home in many homes. While it is important to me that these objects function fully and beautifully, I do not want to micromanage their ultimate function. Consequently, the objects I make are predominantly open-ended in their intended use. Bowls, plates, cups, mugs, and platters, all the forms I have developed are open to receiving many different foods. You will not find among them a pickle server, deviled egg platter, or asparagus tray. Though I like pickles, deviled eggs, and asparagus, I want my pots to bring more to the table and the home than just one identity. I want them to become versatile members of your household and daily life.

Memory. Family.

Many years ago, I came across the letters that my paternal grandparents wrote to each other while they were courting. My grandparents had recently been moved into a nursing home—my grandmother in the final stages of dementia, and my grandfather, while still cogent, was increasingly forgetful. Through reading these letters, I was able to understand and feel close to two people who were no longer mentally present in my life in the way that I had always known them. The small details of these letters revealed so much. That my grandfather's big, rugged hands had written that beautiful, sensitive, and emotive script was astounding to me. He was clearly a little ill at ease in writing that first letter, and so calmed his nerves by describing the minute details of his workshop to my one-day-grandmother. Like me, it seems that he felt rooted by the things around him, and by the work of his hands. My grandmother's patience and quiet, practical love and thoughtfulness are evident in each letter. Later once they are engaged, traces of her anxiety and her fear of not being enough start to show. What is interesting to me about these letters is what is said without being explicitly stated—what is revealed in the spaces between the words, between the conversations. Then there is the handwriting itself, which is so very personal and intimate—a direct connection both to someone's hands and thoughts.

These letters resonate with me in several different ways. First and foremost, they are a connection to two people I love, but who are no longer present in my physical world or life (married for over 50 years, my grandparents died within just a few months of each other in the winter of 2003). Secondly the letters are a record of two lonely people reaching out and connecting, across great distance and great odds to build a life and family together. Thirdly the actual script itself is so beautiful and so emotive that I cannot help but be intrigued by it visually. And lastly I feel a responsibility as their guardian and caretaker, to honour and commemorate them in a less ephemeral way than aged paper. In my search for belonging and desire for a family of my own, these letters remind me that this search is worthwhile—lonely and weary hearts do find homes.

This journey and sense of connection with my paternal grandparent's letters led me to an interest in the handwriting of some of my other ancestors and family members, specifically the women. There is something eminently personal about handwriting—it allows you to feel connected to the writer in a way that printed text on a page simply cannot. Content aside, so much emotion and feeling is conveyed by line weight, spacing, or the way someone loops their capital G. A grocery list, a recipe for oatmeal cookies, or an entry in a calendar—each of these records of the banal aspects of daily life can be a treasure trove of information if you will but take the time to pay attention: for instance, my maternal grandmother's recipe for oatmeal cookies—the card is worn around the edges and bent in spots, suggesting that it was used frequently (I can attest to the fact that oatmeal cookies were a regular feature in the cookie tin). The fact that there are no instructions, other than temperature and baking time, further reinforces that it was a familiar recipe, as well as the notion that the writer was a seasoned cook, and therefore knew that she needed to start by creaming together the shortening and sugar before adding the flour and oatmeal. So much information on one little piece of paper.

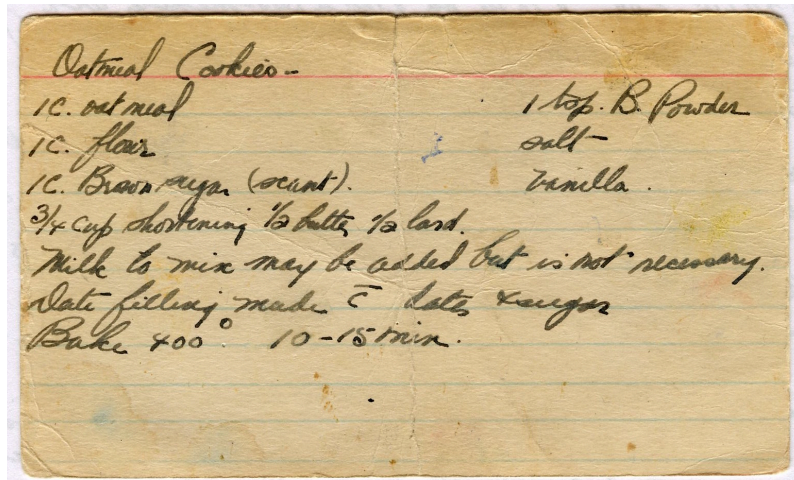


Image 1. Scan of oatmeal Cookie recipe card, written by Alicea Robinson, artist's maternal grandmother.

All of this written ephemera is interesting to me, yet the letters offer a further layer to contemplate. When you have a conversation with someone via posted letters, there is a built-in pause, and time for reflection. You write a letter and entrust it to the postal system. It then exists in limbo, where it has been relinquished by the writer but not yet read by the reader. A no-man's land where anything could happen, and any response is possible. Living in an age where faster is better and shorter is all we have time for, I think about what is lost when we don't make space for any pauses. When you do not take the time to pause, to just be, or reflect a little on being, it is easy to lose sight of who you are and what you want. You start taking your answers for granted, until all of a sudden you no longer remember the questions.

I have been using elements of this text in my own decorative process. Digitally scanning the letters, I then pick out certain words which I enlarge and subsequently laser cut in newsprint. Words are chosen sometimes for content (words such as *hope*, *you*, *alone*, *miss*, and *if*) and sometimes purely based on what is formally interesting to me. The newsprint is then used when decorating, and serves both as a stamp and a resist for colour and white slip. The text elements become a central visual part of the final object, and serve as a formal and conceptual anchor throughout the body of work. The text elements further become a place of visual pause and clarity—tiny moments that hopefully allow the viewer or the user a moment to pause, contemplate the object at hand, and through it feel connected to the present, if only for a breath of time.

Connection. Belonging.

Trace means many different things to me: it is about the idea of both connecting to the past (tracing backwards), as well as forging a pathway towards the future and how I would like to exist in the world. It is about making connections and missing connections.

I was born at home. Though I do not remember it, I am told that it was a festive event. People drank beer and wine, there was a seven-layer dip, and my older brother played with magic sand in the kitchen, as I was brought into the world one floor up. There is something very definitive in knowing you were born at home. Your brother cannot tease you that you do not belong in this family, and you have no recourse to fantasies of being switched at birth. Not when there is photographic evidence that you were born just down the hall, in your parent's bed. The same bed where you are read bedtime stories. The same bed where you bring your mother badly made coffee each year on Mother's Day. The same bed where you were conceived. There is something comforting about this certainty. This is a tether that cannot be taken away. And I am a person who longs for tethers. A tether means you belong somewhere. This connection can be a comfort when I feel adrift in the world.

Tethers can make you feel safe and they can hold you back. A tether is something that holds you fast, but still gives you room to move. A long thin cord like a kite string—it keeps you from floating completely adrift, but it gives you an anchor, a way to trace yourself back to something larger than yourself. That is how I think of family and home. Home is the place where I know I am me and where I will always be welcome; it is a place where I am noticed.

The pots that I make are intended to be at home in the theatre of daily life. Their home is the home, and the humble domestic spaces that entails. I would like them to be used, and/or appreciated in a regular way. I want them to be seen and witnessed by many—by more than just their “owner.”

Motivation.

To be honest, none of this is running through my mind as I work in the studio. Mostly I just make things and delight in doing so, and I am compelled to make more things by the thing I made before. There are tiny moments where things will crystalize and come into focus, and I will know for the smallest breath of time why it is that I make these things. Then the moment passes and I forget. I can never quite hold onto it—I am always chasing it with the next thing I make. The search and the questions are what are interesting to me: how would that cup look with a handle; what if I change the angle of the rim on that bowl; what if I layer those three colours on top of each other? The making becomes a never-ending conversation that I enjoy with the clay. As author Leslie Hazelton so aptly states, “uncertainty is the engine of inquiry”¹.

Ultimately there is a satisfaction in being a maker that does not exist anywhere else. Though clay is my material of choice, others will do the trick. Food, fabric, words—to be able to hold something tangible and visceral in your hands, present it to the world and say “I made this” is rewarding and satisfying in such a complete way. To make something that is of you, yet exists independently from you is empowering. In particular, making something such as a ceramic object, that has the ability to be more permanent than your own life can be a powerful motivator.

I had a conversation years ago with a friend of mine who is a mother—she talked about how interesting it is that her idea of who her child is, is informed so much by the early years of her child’s life—word upon word, moment upon moment, and conversation after conversation, that the child will grow up to have no memory of. Yet it is still this fundamental aspect of who that child is to the mother. I think about this with my pots; I am privy to all their awkward formative stages, when their identity and physical reality is changing moment to moment. They are further transformed by other stages in the process: leather-hard pots are different from bone-dry pots, are different from bisque-fired pots, are different from glazed and finished pots. I do not need for the user to know about this whole journey—that moments of it are revealed in the final object is enough for me. I do however want some aspect of all these layers to be visible, and not totally obscured by the white slip. These layers of colour and texture to me connote a sense of journey—both that the object has undertaken, and that the user experiences when they interact with the object. The more time one spends with the object, the more that is revealed. The areas where I have peeled away the newspaper resist, serve as windows to these layers and the underlying textures, as well as a decisive visual counterpoint to the more opaque parts of the decoration.

¹ Hazelton, Leslie, interview with Mary Hynes, “The Argument for Agnosticism.” *Tapestry*. CBC Radio, Toronto. Jan. 8, 2017.



Image 2. Serving Platter. Red line work is a result of newsprint resist from scanned family ephemera.

I appreciate that these objects I make bear witness to my life in a way that nothing else does. They need me and I need them. It is nice to be needed. There is a kind of mutual tending and noticing. The objects during the making process respond and give back in a way that completed objects do not. This is rewarding. The leather-hard stage is when I fall in love with the work, when the pots feel most dear to me and most alive. There are times when they can take my breath away with their beautiful vulnerability. There is a moment, usually just after I have finished decorating them and peeled away the newsprint resist, when they sit there softly glistening on the ware boards, and I can still see them for all that they have been, and all that they might be. I like the finished objects that I make, but they are placeholders for the pots that exist in my memory.



Image 3. Leather-hard bowls, waiting to be decorated.

I recently listened to an interview with the author Alice Munroe. She talked about her writing in a way that resonated with me and how I feel about my own creative work: “I’m not interested in what it’s about in that narrow sense—it’s the world it creates for me.”² Initially this resonated with me because I struggle with putting boundaries and labels on my own work as an artist, and I latched onto her words as a kind of permission for me to not label and not explain. But the more I think about it the more I realize that is not really what she is saying. I think that she is saying that she does not want to hem her work in with her definition; rather she wants to give the work the leeway to go out into the world and create something on its own, to be what it needs to be. That is the interesting thing about making pots. My studio is the only place they exist in any purely conceptual way, or with my vision of what they will be and do. Pots as objects are rarely ever just static. I would challenge you to look at a cup (any cup) and *not* think of what beverage you would like to drink out of it. The beautiful thing is that we all have such different ideas of what this might be. Looking at the same cup, you might think “milk” while I think “bourbon.” We are both right, and it is magical to me that one cup can hold both of these worlds.

Several years ago I created a project called *Stories I Tell*. For this I made a collection of 40 cups, which I then gave away to members of the public. In exchange, the recipient had to send me a

² “The Lives of Women, Readers and Alice Munro.” *Ideas with Paul Kennedy*, CBC Radio, Toronto. Mar. 8, 2017.

postcard with a story about them using their cup. At the outset of this project I had some rather grand ideas about how these cups were going to become part of and change people's lives. By far my favourite postcard was one from a young girl named Justice, who had travelled to the Canadian prairies with her grandparents, all the way from Naples, Florida. Her postcard read: "Thank you for my cup. It has come in very handy b/c I use it to hold my chapstick collection. I enjoyed meeting you. Yours truly, Justice, Naples, FL, USA".

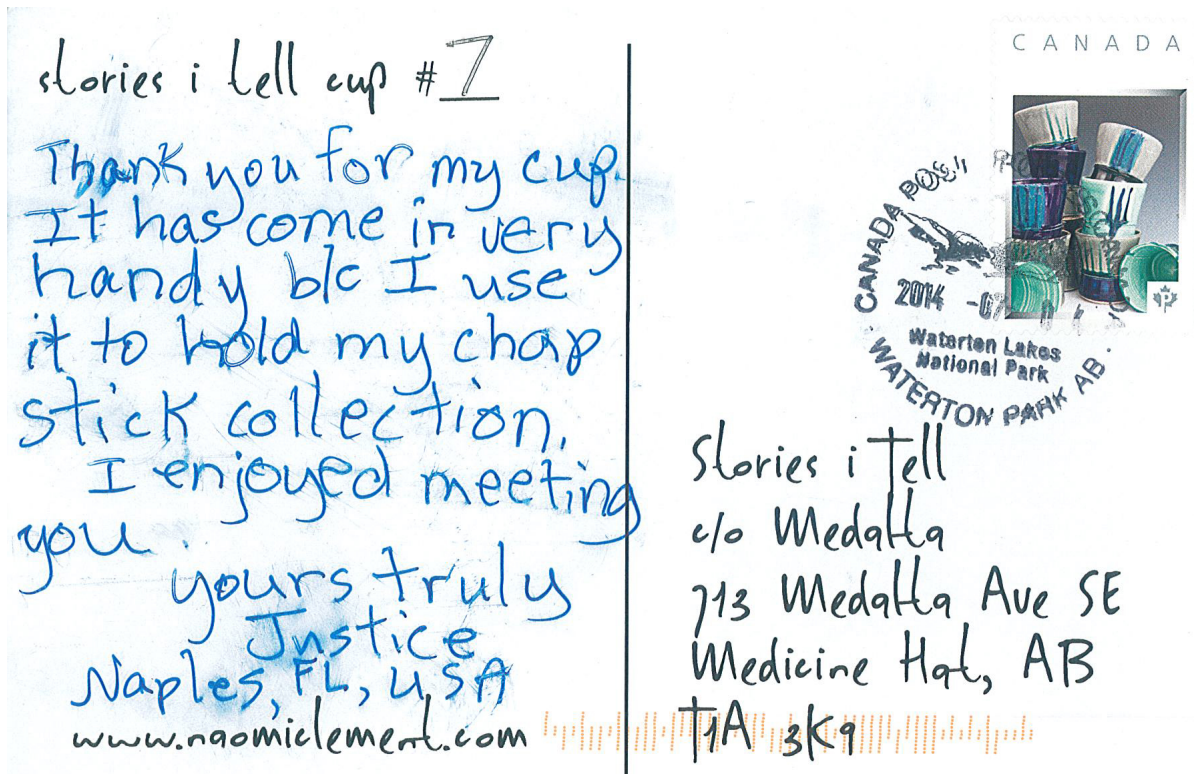


Image 4. Scan of postcard written by Justice, submitted as part of *Stories I Tell* Cup Project.

I love this card for so many reasons, but mostly for what it taught me about my own work. It showed me that indeed the objects I make do change lives, just not in the "lightning-strike" kind of way I had rather arrogantly hoped for. Rather these objects weave themselves into a person's daily routines in minute ways that have a resounding effect on the tenor of a life.

We see vessels and we think about what will fill them; we see a void and want to fill it. Sometimes it is with chapstick, sometimes seven-layer dip. The pots I make help you fill the voids, and create your own world.

Layers.

Objects that have been lived with are beautiful in a way that brand-new objects are not. There is a patina of use, care, and attention that builds up on them, giving them a unique identity and memory of their own.

I want the objects that I make to have this same sense of already having lived life, already having a story when they go out into the world. I want them to feel warm, sturdy, and welcoming. This new body of work is much more open and has more of a sense of volume and of containing than my previous work. These pots hold their arms out to the world in a way that I would like to emulate. They welcome touch and relationships—they attract you in with their bold colours, and then invite you to stay a little while and get to know them better with their tactile nature.

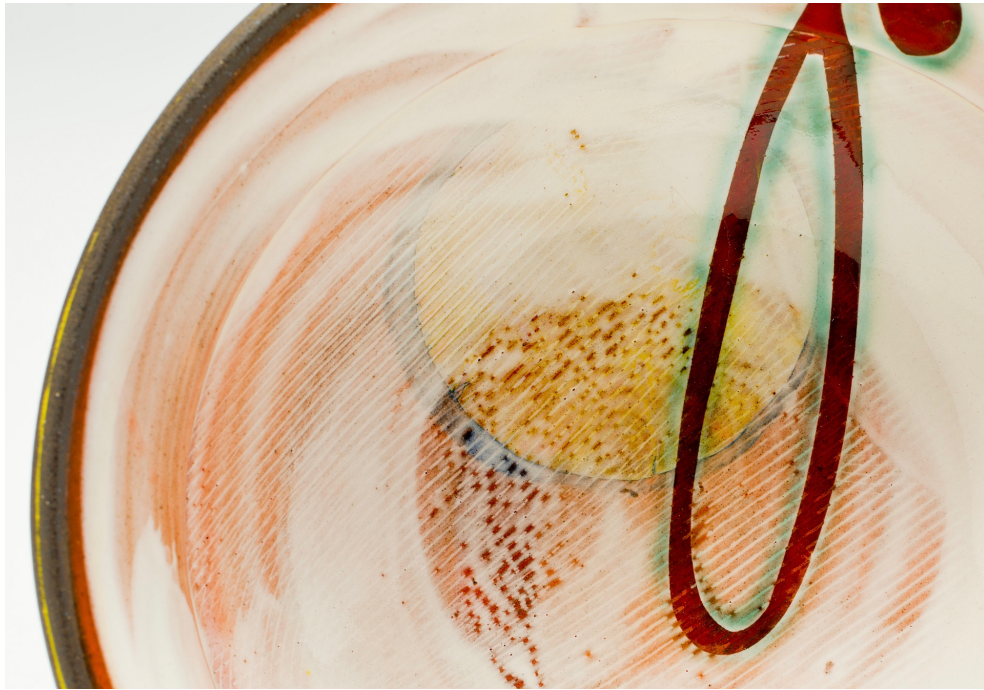


Image 5. Glaze and texture detail.

I achieve this by building up layers of information on the work. I set the stage with a base of texture on the clay, using stamps, textured rollers, and ribs, I impress the clay with layered marks and texture. I then start to layer colours, generally starting with a solid ground of coloured underglaze. At this point I then select a newsprint script cut-out (generated from enlarged sections from family correspondence and ephemera). This in my mind, becomes the fulcrum of the composition—when selecting it I think about appropriate line weight and the negative space in the composition. I then cover the newsprint cut-out in underglaze (of a contrasting/complimentary colour to the ground colour), and place it underglaze side down on the pot. The underglaze acts like a glue, sticking it in place. I “squeegee” it down with a soft plastic rib, making sure that the edges are sealed. I then outline the cutout in another colour

(usually a darker or contrasting tone) and assess if the composition needs another element. Sometimes I will add another small line or text element to punctuate the composition, and or add additional pops of colour. Increasingly, I have been leaving these as layers that exist solely under the white slip and therefore are slightly obscured and less immediately evident. Once I have put down all the desired layers, I then brush white semi-translucent slip over the piece, often intentionally leaving parts uncovered by the slip. This stage of decoration is the most precarious and having the right consistency of slip is crucial. Too thin and it runs all over the place and reveals too much of the layers underneath, resulting in a pot that has no point of rest in it. Too thick and the brush marks are goby and clumsy looking and too much of the underpainting is obscured, resulting in a piece that reveals little to the user and feels cold and impersonal. Once the slip has dried a little, I then peel away the newsprint resist, which creates a clean, crisp line that cuts through all the activity and noise, grounding and focusing the composition and the pot.



Image 6. In-process detail of newspaper resist being peeled away, and the final composition being revealed.

Colour is an integral part of this equation. It is a powerful medium through which to communicate. Colour can energize and excite, calm and soothe; it can fill you with longing, or give you hope. Colour conveys so much without resorting to words. The dark blue and pale green colour scheme of one vessel makes me feel mournful and contemplative, while the red and orange of another lights a fire in my belly, and makes me want to love someone. The yellow on the other hand makes me slightly uneasy—as an accent colour it can be cheerful, but too much of it and it takes away from the other colours. In my work I make instinctive decisions

about colour—generally trying to balance the whole composition, and not have any one colour overpower the others. I do not want the colours to all “match” in the traditional sense, rather I want them to fit and belong together. The relationships and conversations that start to happen when one colour meets another—those are the moments in the work that make me pause and appreciate the moment and feel grateful for what I do.



Image 7. Decoration detail at leather-hard stage. Note the traces of blue seeping into the red-orange—this is where the magic is for me.

I incorporate all of these layers to create objects that connect me to myself, my past, and my future. These pots speak both to my desire to belong, to connect to my beginnings, yet still trace my own path forward.

It is all a delicate balance. I want the final piece to reveal moments of the story, but not give it all up at once—holding something back to be revealed at a later date, and upon more intimate inspection.

Making.

This body of work began to coalesce when I started working with the clay body that I now use. Previously I experimented with a range of different clays: off white stoneware, bright-white porcelain that I mixed from a super-white kaolin from New Zealand, brightly coloured blue, pink and yellow porcelain, and a red/orange stoneware. Through these experimentations I established that it was important to me that the clay body have a distinct colour—a major player in the conversation with a voice of its own. I do not want a neutral; rather I want something that will add to the conversation—a major character in the dialogue, rather than merely part of the chorus. The clay that I now use fires to a dense, smooth, chocolate brown colour; it is an interesting colour in that it can feel both warm and cool. Previous clays I have used served as canvases/backgrounds for the other decorative work I would do on the piece, whereas this clay is an important partner in the final equation. Visually it provides a counterpoint to the colours and activity elsewhere on the pot. My choice to leave large sections of clay bare and unglazed, polished smooth to give a sense of comfort and of a life lived, provides a distinct physical contrast from the glossy surface of the glazed areas.

The formal elements of the work started to come into further focus when I started to use hand-building as my primary construction method. This past fall in the ceramics area at LSU we had a visiting artist, David Eichelberger. During one of his demonstrations, he talked about how he preferred the pace of hand-building over wheel-throwing in ceramics; that although hand-building took longer (he might spend an hour working on a single mug), ultimately he was happier with each individual object. Listening to someone else talk about process in this manner allowed me to realize that I felt the same way. I had been using the potter's wheel as my primary forming method for years, but it was never a process that I loved or found meditative in the way that many others seem to. In fact, it made me anxious and tense and the resulting work was anxious and tense. With the wheel, I felt an obligation to try and make everything *exactly* the same—the same height, same rim, same exact width. I felt I had failed when things were not perfectly, and exactly identical. But I do not actually enjoy it when everything is exactly the same—not in the making process or in the final work—it seems to take all the joy out of it for me. To be clear, it is not that I want all the work to be completely divergent—each cup or bowl a new formal investigation. Rather, I want each pot to be marginally different (perhaps a little taller, wider or fuller than its kin), yet related. I want them to feel like a family—you can see the similarities and trace the origins, yet they each have their unique voice and story. For me, the hand-building is better suited to this than the wheel. With the wheel, I was always scrambling to catch up to the work, constantly beholden to its needs. There is not something inherent in the potter's wheel as a tool that was causing my anxiety, rather it was reflecting back to me all the baggage that I approached it with. Hand-building is new to me and I come to it full of questions. With the wheel, I was trying to impose my answers on it. With hand-building I set the pace. I feel like I am more in control, and therefore I don't mind relinquishing some of that control. The resulting objects feel more natural to me, more lively—there is more of a sense of breath in the work and the pots feel as if they are at home in their own skin.

All that being said, the formal language of wheel-thrown work is still very present in my hand-built work. The forms are mostly round and symmetrical, the pots have a foot that looks trimmed, and there is also a softness to some of the attachments and mark making that suggests the wetness of wheel-thrown clay. As a tool, the potter's wheel does symmetry very well, and my years of working with this tool have given me a love of symmetrical objects. I enjoy objects that feel complete and reference back to themselves—objects that allow you to stay within their borders. When making non-round forms, such as the oblong plates and the pillow platters, I am always trying to make them feel complete in this same way and give them the same sense of wholeness.



Image 8. *Pillow Platter.*

Noticing.

Making functional pots is all about noticing: noticing the material, noticing the process, and noticing the user. It is about noticing the moments and creating moments to notice. It is impossible to discuss utility without acknowledging need. Hand-in-hand with need is want, followed closely by deserve and desire. These are slippery words—the kind of words whose definitions change and shift the moment you think you have gotten your hands around them. The kind of words that can be hard to own; as soon as you say these words out loud, you want to take them back. Owning our needs is a messy business.

However, making functional pots is about thoughtfulness; it is about thinking ahead, about caring, and about noticing others. There is a weight to this. Seeing and acknowledging are powerful acts.

Pots are situated at the centre of my investigations into usefulness, need, and belonging. Closely entwined with our relationship to our domestic spaces and most basic survival needs, pots serve both as placeholders for ideas of function and utility, as well as physical manifestations of them. So intertwined with our daily rituals that they become an extension of our bodies, pots act as a bridge from the corporeal to the beautifully mundane, conductors and facilitators of our intimate moments and rituals. Bearing witness to our lives, they notice us just as we notice them.

Relationships. Edges.

As an artist, I am visually drawn to the spaces between things as much as I am to the actual objects themselves. Technically speaking, I suppose it is both the spaces between, and the edges that help define those spaces: the space where orange becomes red, the place where glaze meets bare clay, the edge of a handle and the end of the pot. The edge of a thing holds so much information about how that object relates to the world. Edges are generally decisive places—a moment where an object communicates how it wants to meet the world. Edges are how we understand the boundaries of our world and the objects that comprise it. Edges can hem us in and contain us, in ways that are both comforting and suffocating. To me these liminal spaces embody physically and visually the idea of what it means to fit in the world, or in other words, what it means to belong. Most of the objects that I make exist as vehicles for these minute edges: the thin line of red around the rim of a plate, the trace texture of my grandfather's handwriting echoing through the many layers of slip and colour, or the thin bleed of blue underglaze into white slip.



Image 9. Detail of edges on stack of bowls.

I particularly enjoy the relationships that happen when you place things close to each other. The bowl stacked on the plate, or that painting above that chair. Relationships blossom when objects spend time next to each other. Suddenly the chair does not seem right, does not seem complete without the turquoise blanket placed over the back. I enjoy placing things together, near each other. But I try not to do so in a way that feels staged. I want the objects to feel like they are having a conversation as they live together.

It was important to me that I install my thesis work in a way that allowed the work to have a conversation, but also allowed the pots room to be themselves. I did not want to create a simulated “home” in the gallery; however neither did I want the objects to exist in a completely neutral space devoid of any personality or feeling. I wanted to create a space that nodded to the warmth of home, but was not restrictive about what that looked like—I did not want to pigeonhole the pots in people’s minds by how I displayed them.

Display surfaces were ultimately the key to the success of this. I knew that I wanted a warm wood colour to display the work on, and I wanted the tables and surfaces to relate to and complement the work. The tables and surfaces I made had wood tops (stained a rich red-tinged brown). The edges of the tops were painted a cool slate-grey, with spaces of accented primary colours, which echoed the inlaid slip details on my work.



Image 10. Table top detail.

The corners and edges of the table tops were rounded to soften them visually, and also relate them back to moments in the work. The legs were purchased hairpin steel legs.

The key element of the exhibition was the piece titled *Dinner*. This piece comprised two parts: a dinner table, and a corresponding sideboard. The dinner table itself was arranged for six people (the number in my immediate family); however only one place had a full setting—the remaining five had round red “placemats” marking where the plates and cups for the missing people should go. To the right of the table was a sideboard and plate rack; this contained the remaining pieces of the place setting.



Image 11. Installation view of *Dinner*.

This piece speaks directly to all the underlying concepts in my work—connecting, loneliness, a desire to belong, and longing for a family. The table is set for six people, but currently only one person is present. The stage is set however, and the table is ready and waiting to welcome more people.



Image 12. Detail of table with lone place setting.

Conclusion.

The pots that I make ask to be noticed and examined, and they ask that you notice me, the maker. I want them to be treasured and held dear, not because they are rare and expensive objects, but because the user feels connected to that specific pot. Another pot may suffice in its place, but it will not be the same. The tenor of the story will be different. My goal is for the final vessel to convey a sense of life lived, and life still to be lived. Each pot becomes a snapshot of the journey, a tether that connects me to me, and me to you—a memory frozen in mud-made-stone for years to come.

Bibliography.

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Vita.

Trace is Naomi Clement's final exhibition as an M.F.A candidate at Louisiana State University (which is ranked #7 nationally) in Baton Rouge, LA. In her work, she explores ideas of home and belonging through the powerful lens of functional ceramics. Naomi graduated with a B.F.A from the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design University (NSCAD) in 2003, where she studied Ceramics and Art History. Before pursuing her graduate studies, Naomi sought out and explored many different experiences as a craftsperson: working as an apprentice to several studio potters, as the ceramics technician during NSCAD's summer session, and as an artist in residence at Medalta in Medicine Hat, AB.

In addition to being a passionate maker, Naomi believes strongly in the importance of service to the community. She currently serves as a Student Director at Large for the National Council for the Education of the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). Naomi has exhibited her work, given lectures, been an artist in residence, taught classes, and assisted at workshops throughout the U.S. and Canada. She is the recipient of numerous awards and scholarships, and was recently named a 2017 Emerging Artist by *Ceramics Monthly* magazine.